What does the review of the Australian Curriculum mean for Senior Modern History?

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In this paper we briefly explore some of recommendations of the *Review of the Australian Curriculum Final Report* (Australian Government, 2014a), henceforth referred to as the *Review,* with reference to Modern History in the senior secondary Australian Curriculum. We also refer to the invited papers provided by history subject matter specialists, Professor Gregory Melleuish and Mr Clive Logan, published as the *Review's Supplementary Material* (Australian Government, 2014b). In doing so, we note that both documents devote most of their attention to critiquing the *Australian Curriculum: History* in the compulsory years from Foundation (F) to Year 10. The *Review's* recommendations for Senior Modern History are considered in this context first with reference to the relationship between the junior and senior history curriculum in Australia. Second, the *Review's* critique of inquiry is analysed in relation to its implications for procedural (to know 'how') and substantive knowledge (to know 'what') in history. Third, the question of *significance*, as raised in the *Review's Supplementary Material* (Australian Government, 2014b), is discussed in the context of developing knowledge and understanding in Modern History as follows.

Context: the relationship between History F-10 and Senior Modern History

Designed to build on and extend the chronological focus of the F-10 History curriculum by focusing on significant forces, events, people and movements that have shaped the modern world, the ACARA Senior Modern History was produced and reviewed as the "agreed and common base for the development of state and territory senior secondary courses" (Australian Government Department of Education, 2014a, p. 267). It must be noted, however, that for many years the study of Modern (and Ancient) History in Australian school curricula has been subject to particular considerations which do not impact on how history can be offered in the junior and primary years of schooling. Pragmatic issues to do with assessment, be it via external examinations or school-based approaches, together with university entrance requirements, have shaped the ways in which the senior history curriculum has been structured and organised in each of the states and territories. Given this context, it might be

argued that realizing a national curriculum for the study of history in the senior years of schooling was always going to be much more challenging than achieving a curriculum for the Years F to10, and that the senior years would remain the prerogative of the Australian states and territories.

Furthermore, unlike history in the primary and lower secondary years, which until 2008 was often subsumed in some jurisdictions by generic social education, Modern History has consistently been offered as a discipline-specific subject in the senior years. The draft of the *Australian Curriculum 7.2: Modern History* (ACARA, 2014) captures some of the qualities that attest to its longevity and viability in the upper school curriculum. It refers to Modern History's capacity to enhance "students' curiosity and imagination and their appreciation of larger themes, individuals, movements, events and ideas that have shaped the contemporary world" (ACARA, 2014, p. 4).

We briefly unpack some of these qualities and focus on the characteristics of 'modern' history and then address the nature of *procedural* and *substantive knowledge* for Modern History, as one of the *Review's* recommendations for the F-10 History Curriculum, which the Senior Years curricula are intended to build upon, was that emphasis should be on placed on "*imparting* [our emphasis] historical knowledge and understanding central to the discipline instead of expecting children to be historiographers" (Australian Government Department of Education, 2014a, p. 181).

Historians debate the arbitrary period from which the 'modern' component of history commences; some attribute it to the start of the French Revolution, others refer to the end of the Medieval Period. The ACARA (2014) Senior Modern History curriculum refers to Modern History as a subject that focuses on the 20th century, whilst referring back to "formative changes from the late 18th century onwards and encourages students to make connections with the changing world of the 21st century" (p. 4). As with all forms of history, Modern History is distinctive in that it involves making sense of something that no longer exists: the past. And as the past no longer exists, historians can only attempt to inquire into what remains and construct a version of the past from the fragments and relics that lie behind. What survives from the past as possible sources of evidence also presents challenges, given that the sources are often incomplete and reflect a range of interests, standpoints and values. Hence, is it difficult to know how representative and reliable a particular source might be.

Epistemological complexity of understanding traces of the past

The *Review* is critical of the focus on inquiry in the national history curriculum. By contradistinction, we contend that acknowledging the complexity and significance of inquiring into the remaining traces of the past is critical to the study of history. Historiography confirms this; for example, the historian, Louis Gottschalk (1950), encapsulated something of the challenges involved in inquiry in *Understanding History* when he referred to historians working with "the surviving part of the recorded part of the remembered part of the observed part of the whole" (1950, p. 45). Forber & Griffith (2011) provide a related emphasis by arguing that our epistemic access to past events is limited, whilst the philosopher and historian, R. G. Collingwood (1956), referred to the historian's efforts to reconstruct in the present those traces of past events as the *re-enactment of past thought*. As noted, this is tricky stuff when sources are open to all sorts of interpretations. In analyzing the philosophical nature of the process of historical inquiry into the past, Hexter (1971) emphasised the dynamic interplay between two 'records'. 'The first record' refers to the remaining sources of evidence, whilst the 'second record' refers to the work of historians, as they interact with and make sense of sources from the past by drawing on their knowledge, skills, imagination and beliefs. According to Hexter, 'history' is produced at the intersection of the 'first' and 'second' record.

In epistemological terms, knowledge produced from this process is open to reflection and revision, since it is largely interpretive and influenced by the viewpoints and perspectives of the individual who produced it. Such knowledge is also tentative and debatable, given the values at play in the past and the present. So when we work with students it is important they understand those complex processes which are germane to constructing narrative accounts or 'histories'. This is why the *Review's* recommendation that "the emphasis should be on *imparting* [our emphasis] historical knowledge and understanding" (Australian Government Department of Education, 2014a, p. 181) is highly problematic and prompts the question *whose* knowledge should be 'imparted'?

The Review's emphasis on *imparting* historical knowledge and understanding is also puzzling given that the National History Curriculum Framing paper emphasized

understanding in history as a complex process involving much more than the absorption of 'imparted' knowledge. Historical understanding is identified in paragraph 39 as requiring:

> the mastery of the methods, procedures, tools and methods of thinking that constitute the discipline of history. As Sam Wineburg, a professor of education and history at Stanford, puts it, historical thinking is not a natural act. Historical understanding differs from the intuitive, memory-based understandings of the past because it requires negotiating between the familiar and the unfamiliar, and involves investigation, debate and reasoning about the past. (National Curriculum Board, 2008, p. 5)

The heuristic techniques in teaching historical understandings

Such historiographic musings indicate that the heuristic techniques, or the historian's 'tools of trade', involve a mixture of inquiry, critical thinking, motives, values, empathy and historical imagination and these syntactic features of history's knowledge domain informed the development process of the curriculum. This emphasis can be seen in the *Australian Curriculum: History F-10's* (ACARA, 2013) description of history as derived from the remains of the past based on evidence *and* the importance of historical understandings that guide an investigation of the past. Therefore, it is surprising that the *Review* is critical of this inquiry approach. Indeed the British researcher, Peter Lee, refers to these understandings as core organizing ideas that "give meaning and structure to our ideas of the discipline of history" (Lee, 2006, p. 131). The Australian national curriculum *Shape* paper (ACARA, 2010) which guided the writers of the curriculum, drew on the international literature, notably the work of Canadian history educator Peter Seixas (2006), to frame these understandings or *procedural* knowledge as evidence; historical significance; continuity and change; cause and consequence; historical perspectives; contestation and contestability; historical empathy and moral judgment.

As noted, the ACARA Senior Modern History curriculum is designed to develop those understandings about history derived from the compulsory study of the *Australian Curriculum History F-10* and extend them through a focus on 20th century history. Concomitantly, it must be stressed that whilst the Australian national curriculum emphasized historical understandings as both principles for investigation *and* providing the structure for the types of knowledge produced, these are not clearly articulated in the curriculum document (Henderson, 2012). This could have prompted the *Review's* critique that history, amongst

some other learning areas, privileges inquiry-based and student-centred teaching and learning and that:

> (s)uch an approach is often associated with constructivism and a focus on skills and capabilities *at the expense of* [our emphasis] essential knowledge and the need for explicit teaching of which direct instruction is one example. (Australian Government, 2014a, p. 5)

This critique can also be linked to Mellueish's (Australian Government, 2014b) concern that the specific historical skills are expressed "in very general terms … and not specifically linked to content" (p. 173) and that students could develop "a very fragmentary knowledge of the human past" (p. 175), which raises the importance of *substantive* knowledge in the curriculum.

The role of substantive and procedural knowledge in historical understanding

In Modern History, as with pre-history, ancient and medieval history, substantive knowledge, or what history is about, involves knowledge about *particular processes over time* such as revolution, imperialism decolonisation, totalitarianism, nationalism amongst others. Historians utilize a range of concepts that can be drawn from other disciplines to express substantive knowledge. Examples of these include propaganda, discrimination, race, gender, social structure, industrialization, trade and so on. It is important to understand the role of ideology in historical narratives in Modern History (Zajda, 2014) and it is claimed in the Review's *Supplementary Material* that there are some "significant imbalances which seem to be ideologically motivated, in particular the exclusion of liberalism as an important progressive doctrine" (Australian Government, 2014b, p. 173) in the history curriculum. In contrast to substantive knowledge, procedural knowledge in history, or how history works, refers to knowing what history focuses on (such as continuity and change) and how the past is interpreted (such as asking questions about sources from the past in order to determine if they can be considered as items of evidence about the past). As noted, the *Shape* paper (ACARA, 2010) identified a particular set of historical understandings from the international literature for the national history curriculum.

Factual forms of knowledge and significance: Balance between procedural and substantive knowledge

Factual forms of knowledge, ranging from dates, key individuals, places or other forms of specific information, are drawn on to provide more details of the historical process or event being investigated. As Melleuish (Australian Government, 2014b) observed, the challenge in designing a curriculum lies in decisions about what to include and what to leave out which, in turn, rest on notions of *significance*. In his invited paper, Melleuish refers to the principle of the 'significant past' or those aspects of history which are of importance or significance for a country. In acknowledging the history of Australia, including Indigenous history, Melleuish concedes that deciding what else might be included from the scope of world history is, at best, challenging. He asks: "(w)hat is the significant past beyond Australia for Australian students studying history in the twenty first century?" (Australian Government, 2014b, p. 178).

In broad terms, an event can be considered significant if people at the time regarded it as significant. As well, significance relates to the degree to which an event had important consequences which may also continue to be relevant in more recent times. Historians and history educators have strong view on determining significance (Partington, 1980; Counsell, 2004; Conway, 2006). Phillips (2002) refers to significance in terms of profundity, quantity, durability and relevance. Seixas and Morton's (2013) note that historical significance varies over time and their typology addresses historical significance in terms of the degree to which something (events, people or developments) results in change over a period of time; is revealing and sheds light on enduring or emerging issues and is shown to occupy a meaningful place in a narrative.

In an effort to structure possible insights into the breadth, depth and scope of significant forces that have shaped the modern world, the ACARA Modern History curriculum identifies four semester units of study each of which offer elective topics to be studied through a focus on key concepts which underpin the discipline of history such as continuity and change, and cause and effect. These units to be studied across the semesters in Year 11 and 12 include Understanding the Modern World; Movements for Change in the 20th century; Modern Nations in the 20th century, and the Modern World since 1945.

The author of the second commissioned paper (Australian Government, 2014b), for the *Review,* Clive Logan (Australian Government, 2014b), expressed concerns about "comparability between some of the topics – some are huge in content and others are less

engaging" (p. 213) and queries the degree to which some units provide sufficient "opportunities for in-depth study", and notes that in contrast to the national history curriculum for F-10 "there are no overarching key inquiry questions" (p. 211) in the Senior Modern History curriculum. Melleuish's critique of the F-10 History curriculum that it provides a fragmented view of the past as "the parts are often difficult to understand without some appreciation of the whole" (p. 173) is echoed in Logan's (2014) observation that whilst the Year 11 and 12 curriculum "attempts to look thematically at issues of Modern History, the chronological connections are not there" (p. 214).

This paper has briefly addressed the *Review of the Australian Curriculum Final Report* (Australian Government, 2014a) with reference to the importance of inquiry and to the procedural and substantial knowledge base for Modern History. Of the organizing ideas that provide meaning and structure to our ideas of the discipline of history, we have addressed the question of significance. At best, the *Review* might prompt teachers of Modern History in the Australian states and territories to reconsider the degree to which they select topics for in-depth investigation from their own jurisdictional syllabuses with particular attention to the notion of significance. Teachers might also consider how briefer studies, referred to in some state syllabus documents as "background, comparative or linking studies" (QSA, 2004. p. 11), can be included to ensure that students are able to locate selected inquiry topics in time within a broader understanding of the history of the past two centuries.

As noted, currently Modern History curricula in Australia, are shaped through state and territory syllabus documents that foreground inquiry so it might be argued that the *Review's* attempts to lessen the emphasis on procedural knowledge could fall on deaf ears. In conclusion, we emphasise that through the study of Modern History, young people can gain valuable insights into why our modern world is the way it is. Modern History also provides opportunities to understand the processes of change and continuity that have shaped today's world, their causes, and the roles people have played in those processes and why some are of particular significance. In broad terms, the *Review* might serve to remind teachers of this, however we argue that they are most likely already cognisant of Modern History's value and purpose for young Australians as a result of working from their own state and territory syllabuses. We conclude that in the current moment, it remains to be seen what might eventuate following the *Review's* recommendations for Senior Modern History.

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